

The Conservatives: can they get beyond “banging on about Europe”?

“Instead of talking about the things that most people care about, we talked about what we cared about most. While parents worried about childcare, getting the kids to school, balancing work and family life - we were banging on about Europe.”

- David Cameron, Party Conference Speech, 2006

“The Conservative Party is back in the centre ground, that doesn't mean some sort of geographical point on the map, it means talking about the things people care about: the NHS, schools, police and crime. That's what we did all week and I think people really got that: that we're not banging on about Europe, we're actually where people are.”

- David Cameron, Statement on 'webcameron'

In recent weeks David Cameron has repeatedly made reference to the idea that the decision to drop “Europe” as an issue is (a) the proof that the Conservatives have moved back the centre ground and (b) a necessary condition of such a shift back into the mainstream.

In one specific sense this is perfectly fair: there is no doubt that the Conservatives' 2001 strategy - attempting to turn the election into a “referendum on the euro”, complete with a naff digital clock counting down the number of days left to “save the pound” - was clearly radically misconceived.

In fact, no-one wants the Conservatives to go back to “banging on” about Europe, with all that those words sum up about their previous tone and their inept handling of the issue. Many eurosceptics would also agree that it makes perfect sense for the Conservatives to emphasise the other issues, central to voters, which they previously neglected.

But is a determination simply not to “bang on” about Europe the end of the story? So far it isn't clear. Some Conservative MPs and shadow ministers would clearly like to never have to deal with the issue again. But there are three main reasons why the Tories should be thinking about how to “do Europe” in a more effective way.

Firstly, if the Conservatives can recast the way they talk about EU issues they should be on to an electoral winner. The key point is that “Europe” is not really a single issue. When journalists talk about the “Europe debate” they tend to mean

the question of the institutional balance of power, and big questions like the euro and the European Constitution.

But the point is that the European dimension is now a critical aspect of a vast number of other issues, from trade and development, the environment, the economy, foreign policy and defence, to border control and home affairs.

Modernising the message

There are huge issues - of particular interest to younger voters - which can only be addressed by talking about Europe.

For example: there's no way to talk meaningfully about international development or fair trade rules, without talking about the EU, given that it runs our trade policy and the second largest aid budget in the world.

Nor is the EU's record a good one. Under Peter Mandelson, the EU is negotiating Economic Partnership Agreements which will carve Africa into a series of blocs, undermine existing African trade agreements, and force African countries to liberalise their trade - without offering a reduction in the EU's trade barriers or farm subsidies in return. All this despite such a plan having been criticised by the Commission on Africa established by Tony Blair, and attacked by a host of development charities.

Take another example: there is no way to talk meaningfully about the environment without talking about Europe. For example, the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme is a farce: more carbon emissions permits have been printed than there is pollution. Unsurprisingly, emissions have gone up under the scheme. Big oil companies like Esso have managed to lobby for so many permits that the system now actually pays out to them. The list of environmental disasters goes on. The Common Agricultural Policy still promotes intensive agribusiness and subsidises the heavy use of chemicals. The Common Fisheries Policy is an ecological disaster, with vast quantities of dead fish being dumped into the sea. These problems can't be solved without engaging on Europe.

An unduckable issue

Secondly, the issue simply isn't going to fall asleep between now and the election. Before the next poll there will be a major row over plans for a new version of the European Constitution, which is likely to start as soon as next March, after the Berlin declaration on the future of Europe. The European elections in mid-2009 are likely to fall close to the most likely period for the general election (or perhaps even on the same day if Gordon Brown sees some tactical possibilities in playing UKIP off against the Tories.)

Even on a day to day basis the Conservatives are running up against EU-related issues at the heart of many of the hottest stories at the moment. For example, towards the end of October the Government will announce the detail of its plans for a work permit system for Bulgarians and Romanians. For reasons we have pointed out before, a work permit system is unlikely to be effective in limiting migration. The Conservatives will need to respond.

Or take a different example. This week's announcement by John Reid that the Home Office will give cash bribes to non-EU nationals in UK prisons to leave the

country is driven by the fact that EU nationals cannot be deported. Reid told the House of Commons that “the immigration and nationality directorate has been taking a robust approach to the deportation of European Economic Area nationals, which has been defeated consistently in the courts. We will be changing the law to strengthen the link between criminality and deportation, but in the meantime we are no longer taking unproductive cases to the courts at the taxpayers’ expense, with negative results.”

With friends like these...

Thirdly, if elected the Conservatives will need a very clear plan of action. Other member states will fight tooth and nail against even the limited reforms that have been suggested by David Cameron so far - like taking back power over social policy, scaling back the CAP, and forming a new group in the European Parliament.

Nor is it likely that other member states will wait for an incoming UK Government to put them on the back foot by demanding reforms which might gain majority support. In fact they would have every incentive to try and isolate a new government at an early stage.

An example of the mentality the Conservatives would be up against is the speech given by the federalist leader of the European People’s Party, Hans-Gert Poettering, at last week’s Conservative Party conference.

He admitted that he had helped to block David Cameron’s attempt to form a new group in the European Parliament by putting pressure on their potential allies: “Of course we did the necessary things, I will confess it here, so that the leadership in London did not find allies... Everybody should know that we are good-willing but not naive... so in the end there were no partners to build a new group.”

He noted also that he had the support of the majority of the Conservatives’ current MEPs in blocking the plan for a new group: “The only thing that reconciled myself and gave me strength not to express what I felt and what I thought, was the loyalty and the friendship of the vast majority of the British group because they did not want to leave the group. They did not want to build a new group... and so this was a strong basis for us to be able to do everything to make sure the British stayed in our group.”

He suggested that he would continue to work against any attempt to form a non-federalist grouping in the Parliament: “You cannot leave a group and expect things to go on like usual. This does not work. Leaving our group is against solidarity.”

Picking the right fights

The crucial thing for the Conservatives will be making sure that they have already built up a strong case and built up both political and extra-parliamentary support for the kind of reforms they hope to pursue once in government. In terms of the environment and trade reform, for example, this will mean winning public support from key development charities.

In fairness, there are some indications that the Conservatives have learned from the failure of Tony Blair’s tactics at the EU negotiating table (essentially a determination to avoid “isolation” at all costs). At the conference in Bournemouth Shadow Europe Minister Graham Brady told an Open Europe fringe meeting that if

they get into government, the Conservatives will be prepared to be “absolutely intransigent” in EU meetings if that is what is needed to bring about reform.

That’s a crucial point. But to drive through a fundamental overhaul of the EU will take more than simply saying no. It would mean having a clear sense of what fights to pick in Brussels, and which to avoid. It also means starting to build up support and intellectual ammunition. The Conservatives have rightly criticised the British Government for failing to set out clearly what it would like to see instead of the EU Constitution, but (as they might privately acknowledge themselves) they too have failed to provide a clear alternative for opponents of the Constitution to rally around. If, as William Hague told the conference, the Conservatives are serious about “championing a new vision for Europe,” they will need to put forward some concrete proposals. Unfortunately, because there is currently no policy group looking at Europe, they lack the manpower to be able to do this. This could be a priority for the new ‘Movement for European Reform’ initiative.

To summarise, dealing with Europe should be an opportunity for the Conservatives, not a headache. Starting from a strong basis (majority support in the UK for moderate euroscepticism) it should be possible for the Conservatives to recast their handling of European issues in such a way that makes it clear that they are part of a mainstream, outward looking world-view. Through work on the environment and global poverty, the Conservatives should be making not just a political but a morally charged case for reform which could win them the support of the voters they need to win the next election.